

Orientalism

This essay will discuss the concept of Orientalism as particularly elaborated by Edward W. Said (1935-2003), whose influence on 'subaltern' and 'postcolonial' studies has been remarkable. It is then important to see how Said's approach to Orientalism had created a wide range of contextualised discussions and criticisms. Finally, the essay will show whether the debate on Orientalism is useful to scholars and students of South Asian studies.

In 1963, Anouar Abdel-Malek published 'Orientalism in Crisis' in which he criticises the Orientalist idea of 'the Orient and Orientals as an "object" of study, stamped with an otherness...of an essential character'. Orientalism creates an 'essentialist conception of the countries, nations and peoples of the Orient'. It interprets the Orient in terms of 'metaphysical', 'a-historical' essentialism, experiencing it from texts and transforming it into an estranged object of knowledge and dominance. The 'hegemonism of possessing minorities' and 'anthropocentrism' are concomitant with 'europocentrism in the area of human and social sciences, and ...in those in direct relationship with non-European peoples'. Thus, the Orient is 'lagging behind' and 'bridging the gap'. In other words, Orientalism represents 'the organic interrelation between *power* and *culture*'.

The 'organic' relationship between power and culture inspires Edward W. Said in *Orientalism* (1978). Said describes 'a long tradition...of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience'. This tradition is 'Orientalism'. The Orient is significant to Europe because it is 'the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages'. It is Europe's 'cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other'. It 'helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience'.

To Said, 'Orientalism expresses and represents' the Orient, 'a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles.' It is 'the discipline by which the Orient was (and is) approached systematically, as a topic of learning, discovery, and practice'. It designates 'that collection of dreams, images, and vocabularies available to anyone who has tried to talk about what lies east of the dividing line'. It is 'a kind of Western projection onto and will to govern over the Orient'.

Echoing Said's criticism, Aziz Al-Azmeh says Orientalism is 'the deliberate apprehension and knowledge of the Orient', 'an ideological trope, an aesthetic, normative and ultimately political designation of things as Oriental', and 'a cultural mood'. Orientalism endows 'things with changeless, "oriental" properties...that go beyond history, that violate the changing nature of things, and that confirm them in a distant and irreducible specificity transcending the bounds of reason'.

What these statements suggest is that European hegemony, elaboration and imagination of 'Orient' disseminate the essence of Orientalism. The ambivalence of the 'West' towards the 'Orient' is old. The Orient's 'rich cultures', 'superior civilisations' and 'ancient wisdom' have inspired many 'Westerners'. Yet, the Orient's 'monstrous mysteries' and 'absurd religions' have threatened the 'West'. Orientalism imagines the Orient as a dominion of hordes, despots, spiritual mystics and exotic sensuality. Exaggeration and imagination with a range of stereotypes connected to cultural prejudices and political hegemony have been essential to

Orientalist views. Encountering the 'Orient' has been significant for the self-image of the 'West', producing identities ranging from European modernity to concepts of cultural, racial and moral superiority.

Said's *Orientalism* provoked tremendous argumentations and criticisms for various reasons. Amal Rassam says Said 'is judging Europe not in terms of its own historical reality and intellectual development, but in terms of the claims it makes for itself'. Rassam thinks Europe's 'history' or 'intellectual development' was an 'internal affair'. In contrast, Said wants to say Europe's history or literature (on non-Europeans) was affected by Europe's relationship with and imagination of non-Europeans.

Some critique of Said's Orientalism is rather curious. Steve Bruce thinks the term 'Orientalism' is useless and 'too reminiscent of the 1970s habit of Marxists to dismiss everyone with whom they disagreed as "bourgeois sociologists"'. This suggests that Said 'dismissed' people simply because he disagreed with them. Stephen Slemon says Said 'ends up referring the whole structure of colonialist discourse back to a single and monolithic originating intention'. In fact, Said never intended to discuss the 'whole structure of colonialist discourse'. Rather, he wanted to affirm that 'Orientalism' was not possible without the 'will to dominate'. The relationship between knowledge and power is inevitable.

However, it is ironic that many writers accused Said of silencing the voices and self-representations of the colonised people. Megan Vaughan thinks Said denies 'the possibility of any alternative description of 'the Orient', any alternative forms of knowledge and...any agency on the part of the colonised'. Expressing a similar view, Robert Young says Said 'does not offer a method that enabled a counter-representation that allowed the subaltern to speak'. In a more ideological and dogmatic way, Aijaz Ahmad argues that *Orientalism* is 'ambivalent', 'ahistorical', essentialises 'the West' and ignores the intelligentsia's response in the colonised countries.

The above discussion is necessary to see how some of Said's proponents and critics applied their arguments about *Orientalism* in their works on South Asia or India. Said's criticism's of 'Orientalism', to begin with, helps us understand the relationship between power and the affirmative authority of scholarship on South Asia. It shows how 'Western' works are produced within a dichotomous relation with the 'Orient'. Mary Douglas says India is 'a mirror image' of Europe, implying that India opposes 'Europe' and that the 'Western' imagery of India makes an image of the 'West' possible. John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) claims liberty and representative government are unworkable in India because the Indians are inferior to Europeans.

'Romanticising the Orient' explains why Orientalists sought to revitalise Europe by 'Indian' culture, religion and spirituality. Orientalists perceived India as the domain of spirit, used Biblical themes to describe religious and social situations and imagined Europe's spiritual rebirth and redemption. Orientalists mastering 'Indian' languages were seen as heroes and knights. European institutions and works persuaded Europeans to seek a vanished spirit in the promised land of India, guileless innocence, a vision of wholeness, a yearning for the recovery of what poets and philosophers felt the age had lost, and for a unification of religion, philosophy and art.

It is interesting to examine Said's assertion that Orientalism had the 'eminence', 'power' and 'authority over the Orient that it had'. David Kopf says British Orientalists impressed Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964) who used Orientalist knowledge to build up a new India. Kopf's statement alludes to the question of indigenous Orientalism, which claims to recycle the 'Orient' to its source. The idea of

'Indianness' has been adapted as a self-identity. Orientalist ideas were prestigious among Indian aristocracy and academic elites. Ideas like the golden age of the Vedic period, spiritual India, the centrality of caste and 'Hinduism' as a single religion were Orientalist inventions.

Indian thinkers, such as Vivekananda (1863-1902) and Gandhi (1869-1949), used Orientalist literature to form 'modern Hinduism' and serve Indian nationalism. They invented a 'pristine genesis' of 'Hinduism' and considered the *Bhagavad Gita* the uniting sacred text of India. This implies India's identities have to succumb to a 'Hindu identity'. Thus, 'Internal Orientalism' makes it difficult 'to think about India outside of orientalist habits and categories'.

Rajnarayan Chandavarkar says Orientalism 'encouraged historians to deem Indian society as exception to every rule of social (and historical) explanation'. Writers perceive unique 'Indian culture' and timeless 'essence', which became part of 'a political discourse' that views 'all group differences' as 'dangerous separatisms'. 'This essentialization and romanticization of group differences', Breckenridge and Veer say, 'is probably the most damaging part of the Orientalist bequest to postcolonial politics. Moreover, it was in the interest of Orientalism to reinforce and essentialise Hindu-Muslim communalism.

Brahmanic authority and Orientalism supported each other. Brahmanic hegemony de-Orientalised Brahmins and Orientalised India's non-Brahmanic communities. Brahmanism informed Orientalism that created a written canon to substitute diverse oral traditions in 'Hinduism'. The *Bhagavad Gita* became canonical. An Aryan and Vedic past was manufactured to underline the idea of declining Hindu society and to blame Muslims for invading India and destroying 'Indian civilisation'. This view led Hindu nationalists to construct a fabulous past and the 'foreignness' of Muslims and Christians. Thus, Orientalist discourse helped to essentialise 'Hindu ideology' as the foundation of India.

Many Orientalists ignored folk Indian traditions. They thought Brahmanism reflected the ancient Vedic Weltanschauung. Sheldon Pollock says British colonialism and Orientalism had created Indian history and society that was traditionalised and Sanskritised. Elitist Brahmanism proclaimed itself as the true representation of 'Indianness' and 'Hinduism'. The fact, however, is that the Vedic literature and other sanctioned texts of 'Hinduism' are unfamiliar to many 'Hindus'. Many 'Hindu' groups ignore or interpret concepts such as *karma* and *dharma* differently.

It is, however, relevant to question what Said's critics had to say in the context of India. Wendy Doniger, who 'retranslated' the *Rig Veda*, says the anti-Orientalist critique taught 'Indologists' to think Orientalists committed a terrible sin. She suggests the idea that Orientalists created or imagined India is itself a myth. She hints at 'a black hole' before British colonialists and Orientalists arrived in India. She then argues that India was capable of inventing itself for centuries before, during, and after British presence. This means Indians conceived themselves as people in a place that was different from others. Although British colonialism distorted the self-representations of Indians, the power of Orientalism could not totally supersede the Indians' ways of representing themselves, nor did it eradicate their knowledge of their history. Thus, Orientalism and anti-Orientalism inform us about the power of language and imagination because both of them have denied the agency of Indian imagination.

Peter Heehs says Said's and Inden's interpretation of Orientalism is part of the Orientalist discourse inside the history of Orientalism. He argues that claiming that European Orientalists constructed Hinduism, the caste system and so forth, takes

away the 'Indian agency', and gives a new life to Eurocentrism. In other words, to blame Orientalism for 'imagining India' means to grant excessive power to Orientalism and to ignore the significance of Indian self-representations. What Doniger and Heehs say should persuade concerned students to see how and in what ways Indians represented and imagined themselves before the European colonisation of India.

Nonetheless, it is important to see the influence of the 'imaginative geography' of Orientalism on the mythologisation of 'Indian self-representations'. Some Indians use the Orientalist imagination of India as the spiritual, collectivistic, holistic locus to construct an ideological discourse that depicts the 'West' as an immoral, individualistic, hedonistic, spiritless, materialistic essentialism. They think 'the wisdom of India' and 'Hindu Brahmanism' are the true treasures of the Indian nation. The 'West' should imitate 'India' to rise up from its depravity. Thus, political power is complicated with nationalistic representations of India. Moreover, the anti-Orientalist propaganda, though this was not Said's intention, has patronised the political ideology of nationalism and fundamentalism. In some cases, the struggle for the 'agency of Indian self-representations' on behalf of the Indians is guileful and mendacious. What has been the norm in 'South Asian' or 'Indian' studies is the phobia of otherness, an irreconcilable dichotomy between generalised myths such as the 'West' and 'India'.

Understanding Orientalism is useful in the context of South Asia, for it enables us to understand the relationship between political hegemony and knowledge. Said says Orientalism exposes 'the European will to domination...to create an orderly discipline of study...a set of institutions, a latent vocabulary...a subject matter, and...subject races'. It represents 'the power to make philological distinctions...and the institutional force to make statements about Oriental mentality, the inscrutable Oriental, the unreliable and degenerate Oriental'. It is, then, the responsibility of concerned people to expose the 'will to domination', the 'orderly discipline of study' and the generalisation and essentialisation of mentalities.

Said's criticism of Orientalism persuades us to go beyond the monotonous periodisation of Indian traditions. It lets us question the abstract typologies of mentalities and affirm the dynamism of cultural and political agency. It is thus important to rethink the hegemonic 'Western' discourse about India. This includes the concept of time that divides 'Indian history' into a primordial Vedic period as the golden age of India and a time of degeneration of contemporary Indian society. This division is noticeable in the discursive formations about 'Hinduism'. Many Indians adopted Orientalist ideas and used them in a nationalistic discourse.

The concept of Orientalism is useful in analysing prevailing literature, generalised and essentialised ideas such as 'Hinduism' and 'Islam'. It is also important in understanding women's movements and feminist discourses in South Asia. Many South Asian women used the criticism of Orientalism to criticise literature, imaginations and situations affecting women. Yet, the idea of Orientalism and the 'Western imagery of the Orient' can be used ideologically by extremist nationalists and fundamentalists who suppress the freedom of thought under the pretence of defending the 'Orient' and resisting the 'West'. Misunderstanding the project of Orientalism may increase hostility between people and glorify myths such as 'West' and 'Orient'. It is no longer desirable, in our globalised world, to say that only South Asians can talk about South Asia, or only 'Hindus' can explain Indian religious traditions.

Nevertheless, the concept of Orientalism makes us understand the relationship between 'Asian studies' and the European colonialism of India which began when the Portuguese built a fort at Cochin in 1503. It encourages us, for instance, to enquire into the relationship between European companies, such as the East India Company of London, the Dutch *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* and the French *Compagnie des Indes*, and the production of literature about South Asia. Perhaps such an inquiry would elucidate how European colonialism persuaded European travelers, missionaries and scholars to explore India and to make it a part of what Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) called 'East is East, and West is West.'

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